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ABSTRACT

Louisiana, like other agricultural states, has long known the cyclic demand for large numbers of seasonal farm workers. These migrant workers are being replaced by machines, except during harvesting of crops which resist mechanization (e.g., strawberries). Families migrate to Louisiana to pick berries. Due to this influx of educatables, the local school systems are unable to meet the needs of the migrant children. To determine the number and location of the migrant children in the summer of 1968, the state's teachers and the Louisiana State Department of Education conducted a survey of migrant farmers and their families. Some 3600 contacts with individuals and agencies throughout the state were made; as a result, 296 families were interviewed, totalling among them 1069 children. Of this total, 730 were defined as migrants. Church groups and local school systems have developed migrant programs which attempt to meet the unique needs of the migrant children. However, the thin dispersion of the children presents a problem in designing educational services such as the proposed pilot project on computer assisted instruction in reading. (AN)

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LOUISIANA'S CHILDREN OF THE FIELDS

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FOREWORD

For the greater part of her history, Louisiana has been an agricultural state, an area of farms and plantations.

She knew that itinerant agricultural workers moved into, about and out of her confines. She knew also that children moved with these streams and that their schooling suffered because of their migrancy.

The migrant amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act enabled the State to collect accurate data on these youngsters and to plan intelligently to help them overcome the problems generated by their way of life. This publication is a report of that census and those plans.

Louisiana joins the other migrant states in commending the interest at the Federal level in the welfare of these young Americans whose nomadic existence hurts their education.

They deserve to share more fully in the good life our land affords. Migrant programs sponsored by the Louisiana State Department of Education offer these young citizens the opportunity to so share.

William J. Dodd
State Superintendent of
Public Education

Men Versus Machines

Like other predominantly agricultural states, Louisiana has long known the cyclic demand for large numbers of seasonal farm workers. Mobile or transient laborers have from the first constituted a good part of the seasonal force, whether their migration to areas of need was from neighboring states or from those not so close, from the isles of the Caribbean or from other parts of the State itself.

Earlier in the century, Louisiana's labor economics was a rather simple picture--local folk could not supply all the labor needed to carry the crop from planting through harvest. Consequently, at varying times of the year, different areas of the State had to import workers from outside that area.

As modern technology moved ahead, mechanization, slowly at first then drastically, changed the profile of Louisiana's farm labor market.

The annual harvests of sugar cane and cotton that in years past demanded thousands of supplemental workers came gradually to be done almost completely by the mechanical picker and cutter.

Certain crops however resist mechanization. The strawberry is one and though the machines have come to the cotton and cane fields, Louisiana's berries need the human touch.

While each year of the past decade or so has seen the State slowly change from one that demanded migrant labor to one that supplies it, southeast Louisiana each spring continues to call upon itinerant harvesters to handpick her strawberries, harvesters who for the most part come out of south Texas and for whom the berry crop is but one stop on their annual swing about the country.

One-half the story of migrant labor in Louisiana, then, is the recurring visits of Mexican-American families each spring for a six-week or two-month stay in the strawberry belt. The other half of the story is the seasonal out-migration of farm workers no longer needed in the cotton and cane parishes where the machine has replaced the hand.

The Berry Belt

In the mid-fifties church groups in the southeastern sector of the State took steps to meet as best they could the needs of the hundreds of children who came with their parents to pick the berries. The local school systems were in no way equipped to deal with this annual influx of educables whose coming and going were totally dependent on the maturing of the fruit. Local school people however encouraged the church efforts and offered what assistance they could.

In 1960 the State government authorized a study of migrant labor by a subgroup of the Committee on Interdepartmental Relations.

Official interest, at the State level, in those children whose development suffered from their migrancy dates from this report. The findings indicated that Louisiana shared, with many states of the nation, the complexus of actual and potential problems inherent in the migration of agricultural laborers to and from the State. The 1960 report found no substantial involvement of public agencies.

In 1966 all responsibility for the schooling of the young strawberry pickers was assumed by the department of the Tangipahoa Parish School Board administering Title I funds under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This parish is in the heart of the berry-producing area. The school, until this time operated by the Migrant Ministry, was located

at Natalbany, Louisiana.

In 1966 amendments to the ESEA made federal funds available for migrant education programs. The State Department of Education through the Federal Programs Section has provided financial assistance for the construction and operation of this school.

The Department of Education felt that problems caused by the casual farm work of both parents and children existed in other areas of the State. The 1960 report had recommended an exhaustive study of migrant farm labor in Louisiana. Such a study had not been made. Any effort on the part of Louisiana to reflect the interest of the national Office of Education in the schooling of migrant children would depend upon accurate data concerning them. Any application for funds voted by a Congress conscious of the need had to be founded on a census of such children that simply did not exist.

Moved by such considerations, the Superintendent of Education proposed that a study be made by the Louisiana Department of Education to determine as accurately as possible how many school-age children of farm laborers migrated into, out of and about the State.

As a result, after discussion with representatives of the national Office of Education at the Denver meeting of migrant specialists, a proposal was submitted to the Migrant Programs Section of that office in May of 1968.

It requested a grant under Title I (as amended in 1966) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to conduct a Statewide census of migrant children of agricultural workers and to plan programs indicated by the results. The Commissioner of Education approved the proposal and funded the research. The Department conducted the survey during the summer of 1968 and that study is the subject of this report.

In the Field

The State of Louisiana contains 64 "parishes" (or counties) and these local governmental units were used as the territorial divisions or primary "census tracts" for the location of the children of agricultural migrants. The count was taken on a parish level.

Personnel were recruited from the ranks of the State's teachers since it was felt that not only would they welcome summer employment, but that they represented a talent pool that could supply the intelligence and tact (even compassion) essential to field workers in such a task.

To administer the survey, a State office was set up in the centrally-located capital, with a coordinator, an assistant and two secretaries. The State was divided into three geographical areas - north, south and central - and three Area Consultants were employed to supervise the specialists actually taking the census. The northern and southern area men opened offices in those parts of the State and had secretaries assigned them. The central area consultant worked out of the State office and used its clerical staff.

A check list containing sources to be contacted was given the worker for each parish, sources that would possibly know of or be involved with farm workers who might come into or leave the area with the crop seasons. An interview form was to be filled out as each of the sources was contacted. The primary data source was a family record sheet, a detailed form for recording vital statistics of families the interviewer felt fitted the definition of migrant farm workers.

The description of such a worker used as a criterion by the census takers was: a laborer who moved his residence into or out of the parish or State since 1963 and whose move was in some way occasioned by or connected with agricultural or agriculturally-related employment. Such a definition, it was felt, would include both interstate and intrastate migrants, home-based here or elsewhere.

A letter of introduction signed by the State Superintendent of Education was furnished each specialist to assure those interviewed that the survey was a legitimate and confidential undertaking authorized by the Louisiana State Department of Education and to request their cooperation.

The forty specialists who were to take the census met with the State staff at the Capitol. Packets containing the necessary forms were distributed to the workers and reporting procedures were explained.

The list of interviews was the worker's primary tool. These sources to be contacted for information on itinerant farm labor were exhausted as expeditiously as possible. They were filed with area consultants at six-week intervals. The specialists were encouraged to be imaginative in exploring sources other than those listed and to ask each contact for suggestions as to knowledgeable persons in the community who, while not shown as a source, might give some information about the persons sought.

The interview form was the form for recording the results of the interviews had with persons or agencies suggested by the source sheet or check list. These forms were sent at the end of each week to the office for the area in which the specialist worked.

The family information sheet was the data-schedule for the survey since this form was filed after talking with the family whose children were thought to be those of migratory farm laborers. These forms were filed with the area office as they were obtained.

Area Consultants were asked to make weekly phone reports to the central office as a means of enabling that office to file interim reports with the Department of Education.

All of the census forms mentioned above were retained on file in the area offices until the project closed.

This was thought advisable as it facilitated contact with the field workers concerning their reports. Questions concerning the reports, the need for further information or clarification and other problems were better handled at the area level than by the central office.

Also, as further leads developed, area consultants were better located to contact field workers than was the office in the capital city. Despite increasing industrialization, Louisiana still has vast areas of truly rural countryside. Many of the contacts made by the interviewers took them over unpaved roads, far from phones, into truly isolated sections of the State.

Halfway through the survey the workers in the field met in the office of their area consultant with the staff of the central office.

These meetings proved profitable in many ways. They enabled the central office to evaluate the progress of the study. They brought together the people actually involved in taking the census and the resulting dialogue furnished insights into the workability of the techniques being used. This sharing of experiences enabled those in charge to forestall in one area problems that had arisen in another.

Sources of information discovered by some workers were relayed to others. Reticence on the part of interviewees had been sensed by some workers. Group discussion of this and other problems made available to all the methods employed by those who had succeeded in breaking down such reserve or in overcoming other obstacles.

In all three meetings much talk centered around the application of the definition of a migrant child. Are transient timber workers related to agriculture? Are itinerant workers on tree farms or in the pulpwood industry such as we seek? Do the children of laborers who last year worked a farm and are now employed in a fertilizer factory qualify? Does a family that moves about the State "stumping" cut-over land fit the definition? Are the children of residentially mobile parents who work in the poultry business "migrants" for purposes of the survey?

These and many other questions were posed. In some instances the logic of the many answered the individual's query. In others, an opinion from the Migrant Section of the Office of Education authoritatively settled the issue.

Where neither common sense nor official interpretation seemed to decide, workers were told to treat doubtful cases as certain and leave it to the central office to clarify matters once the survey was ended.

In the Office

In addition to supervising the survey the central staff spent its time investigating by mail, by phone and by personal calls every possible source of information on migratory labor in the State.

Early in the study they learned that the Farm Labor Service of the Division of Employment Security would be their primary source of information. This office furnished assistance without which the survey would have been meaningless. It was through the guidance of this agency that the central staff came to see that a certain misorientation was operative in the initial stages of the census. The existence of the annual influx of Mexican-American children into the berry belt had subtly set up an unconscious yet effective bias in the thinking of those involved in finding the migrant child. They were seeking children who moved into Louisiana, as did the sons and daughters of the south Texas strawberry pickers, while unaware of what was becoming clearer and clearer to Farm Labor Service experts - more migrant farm laborers are home-based in Louisiana than come here from another home-base.

Other efforts to exhaust any and all sources at the State level involved consultation with the State office of AFL-CIO, the school attendance records office of the State Department of Education and the Louisiana Welfare Department.

Interagency communication was early established with the State Office of Economic Opportunity. Information on OEO programs for seasonal farm workers furnished leads for investigation by survey people in the field. The Office made mention of the migrant study in its newsletter and asked that all regional offices cooperate with the census takers. A conference was arranged at Hammond, Louisiana, the heart of the area of known migrancy. Members of the central staff met there with local Farm Labor Service representatives and clergymen of the Migrant Ministry.

The discovery of numerous home-based migrants in the strawberry parishes corroborated the opinion of Employment Security experts that Louisiana is fast becoming a migrant farm labor supply source as opposed to its earlier status as a demand state for such workers.

To find if such a situation existed in other areas, letters were addressed to over a hundred school principals in rural, low-income districts. They were asked if they noticed enrollments late in the fall or withdrawals early in the spring that could indicate the coming and going of migrant families whose children attended their school.

Assessment

An anti-labor bias made information hard to come by, in some instances. An attempt to organize cane workers some years ago left noticeable scars. Fear of some families that surveyors were connected with the police or were truant officers colored their responses despite reassurances to the contrary.

In certain instances principals and teachers could not be reached by the field workers. Summer sessions at colleges and universities, other employment and family vacations necessitated their absence.

The suggested list of interviews was enlarged by workers who discovered that rural mail-carriers, country storekeepers and police jurors (Louisiana's counterpart of the county supervisors) were excellent sources of information, well versed in the comings and goings of their areas.

In the main the design of the survey was sound. Specialists well known in an area obtained their information more easily. The most significant contribution of the summer's work was the assurance that a thorough search of the State had been made. It is as essential to know where migrants are not located as to know where they are or have been or will be. When the appearance of migrants at a later date was mentioned, the field specialists so indicated. At the prescribed time follow-ups can be made by a smaller staff than was necessary for the survey.

The forms used in the survey section seemed well-designed and provided the needed information. In many cases the specialists saw fit to append narratives and comment regarding the situation or special circumstances of the family or the person interviewed. These notes were helpful to the State staff in establishing the validity of migrancy. In general each of the instruments accomplished what had been intended.

Persons connected with State and local agencies were cooperative for the most part. Even planters were polite if not altogether candid with the specialists.

Some census takers of course were more enterprising and imaginative than others. Some were more adept in conducting interviews. Some even ventured into the fields with planters and drank coffee or soft drinks with country store proprietors to obtain the necessary information. Some followed false leads and still others encountered dead ends in some of their work.

In general, the State was scoured, and information obtained was recorded; analysis of data has produced certain findings relative to migrant agricultural workers which up until now have been mere conjecture.

The Department of Education through the summer migrant survey has learned a great deal about the children of migrant workers who reside for a period of time in Louisiana.

FINDINGS

The census produced 3600 contacts with individuals and agencies throughout the State. As a result of these contacts, 296 families were interviewed, totalling among them 1069 children. Of this total, 730 qualify as migrants for the purposes of the definition drawn up by the Office of Education.

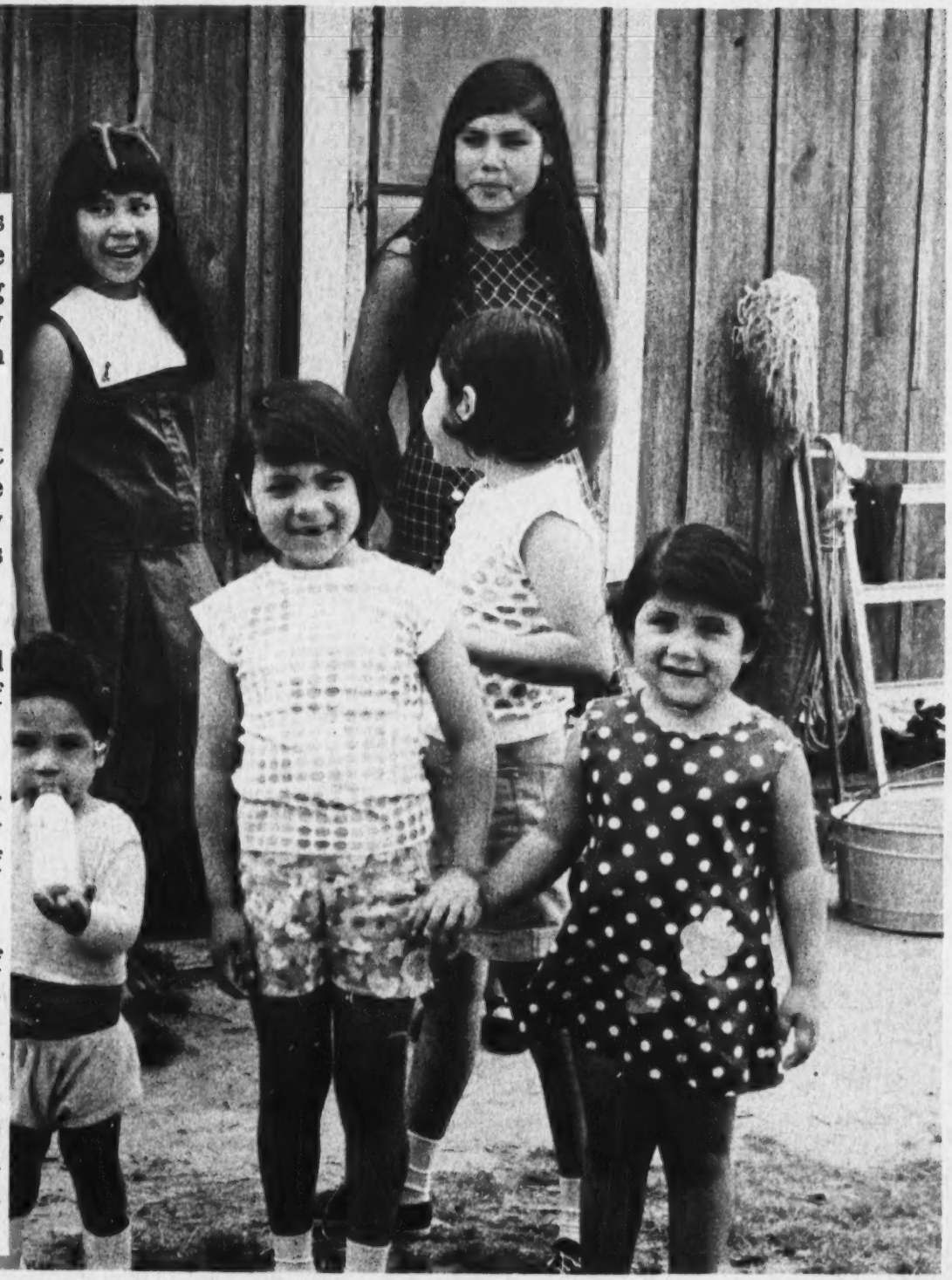
The results of the survey, as reported below, do not include the children who come each spring for the strawberry harvest. The special school at Natalbany enrolled 230 of these Mexican-American youngsters in 1968 and 220 in 1969.

This in-migration was known to occur each year and the study was predominantly concerned with areas of the state where accurate data was not available.

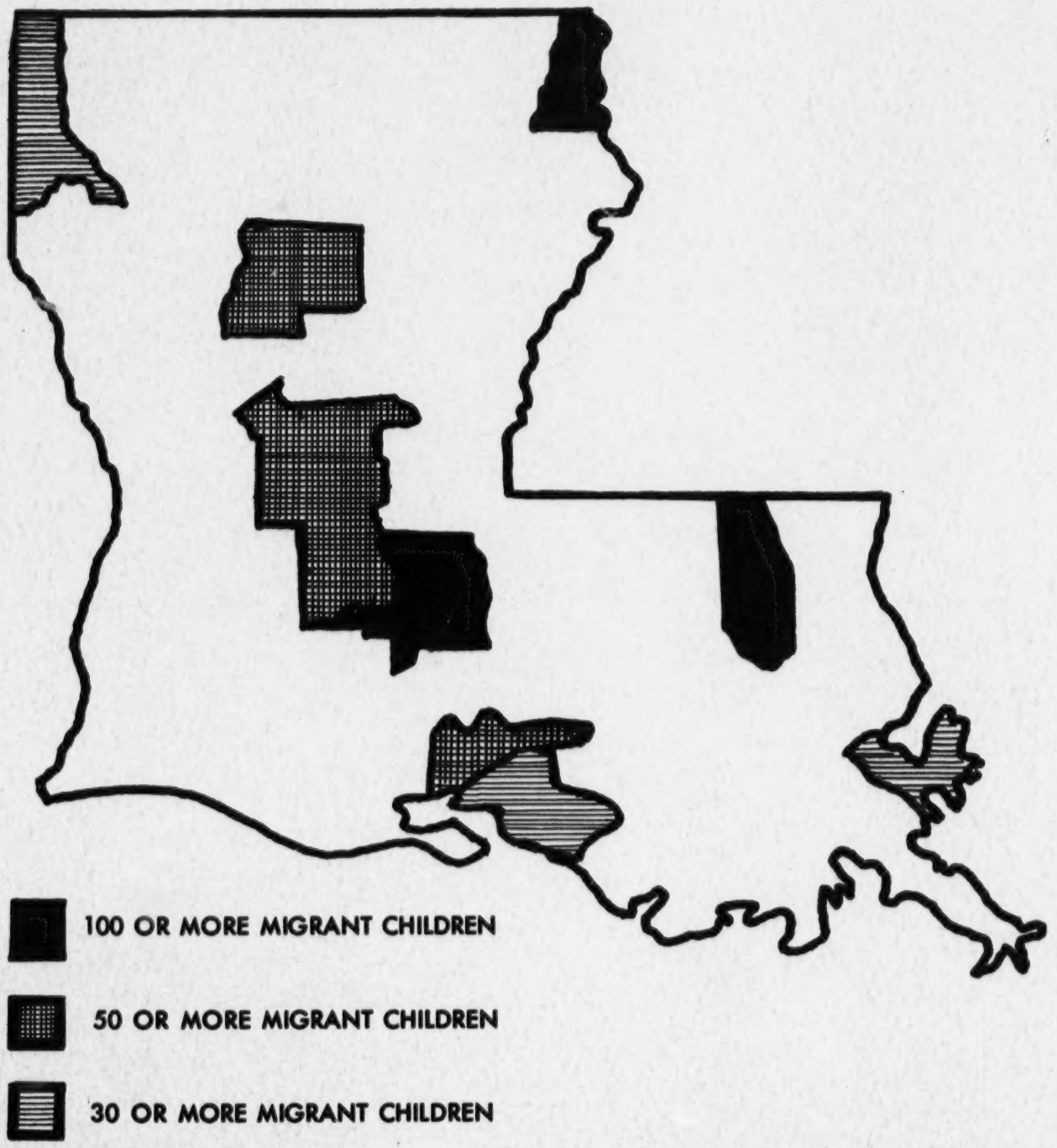
The figure shown for Tangipahoa parish represents migrant children discovered in that area who are cheifly in Negro families which out-migrate for portions of the year.

The census found some 900 children located in 26 of the States 64 parishes with concentrations in 10 parishes as indicated by the map.

Indicative of the extreme difficulty of assuring complete accuracy is the fact that one parish not on the list, Jefferson Parish, is at present doing its own investigation and feels it has enrolled in this session some 200 children that would qualify for migrant aid.



Parish	Migrant Children
Acadia	29
Allen	5
Avoyelles	14
Caddo	29
Caldwell	4
Cameron	3
East Baton Rouge	7
East Carroll	100
Evangeline	55
Iberia	50
Iberville	8
LaSalle	5
Lincoln	1
Livingston	16
Plaquemines	13
Rapides	55
St. Bernard	31
St. Helena	20
St. Landry	100
St. Mary	35
Vermilion	27
Washington	17
West Baton Rouge	4
West Feliciana	21
Winn	63
Tangipahoa	200
	912



Operation

The Migrant Program of the Louisiana State Department of Education will continue to operate, through local school authorities, the Tangipahoa parish school for the children of interstate migrants who early each year come to pick the berries.

Planning

The Migrant Program is working with the University of Southwestern Louisiana to develop software for a pilot project in the computer-assisted instruction of reading. Terminals will be located at the Natalbany school and at schools in other sections of the State where sufficient numbers of migrant children are clustered.

The thin dispersion of the several hundred children throughout the State's school systems presents a problem in designing educational services.

However, concentration is sufficient enough in three parishes to warrant programs this summer. East Carroll parish and the parish of St. Landry will make their first efforts to meet the special educational needs of itinerant farm children. Tangipahoa parish, long involved in schooling migrant children, will for the first time offer a vacation session for the children of Mexican-American farm workers who have contracted to remain in the area until the fall.

These three parishes are likewise investigating the feasibility of designing educational offerings tailored to the special needs of these children to be integrated with the regular academic session. Efforts are now being made to determine how many of the children who will be here this summer will also be present for some part of the school year.

Despite the thoroughness of the survey effort, Louisiana learns more each day about the almost-unpredictable movements of her mobile farm labor force and the Department of Education is encouraging an attitude of adaptability on the part of local school authorities who have the children of these workers in their school systems.

Home Based

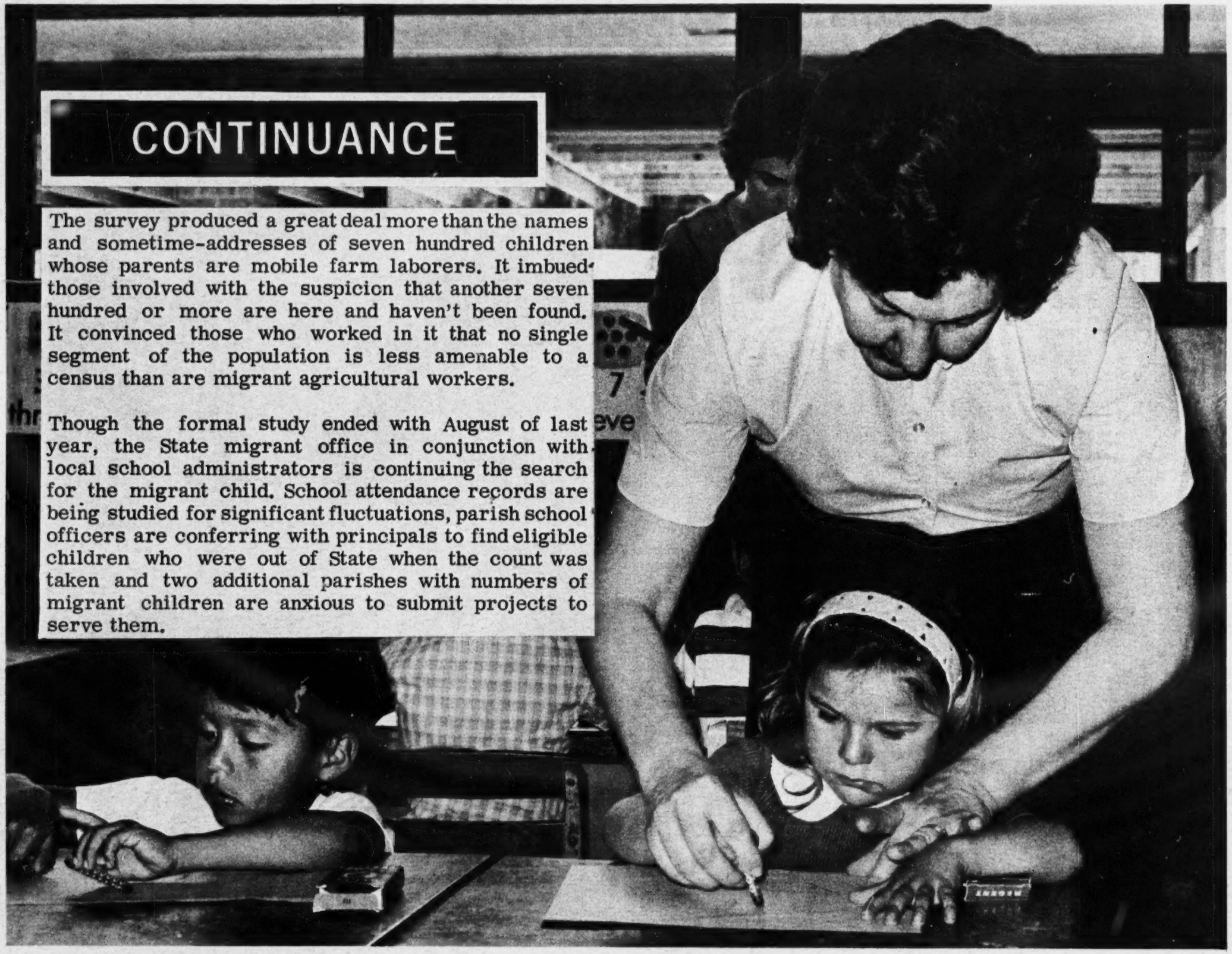
The survey discovered more than a hundred children in the strawberry area who call that area home but travel with parents to the summer harvest in other states.

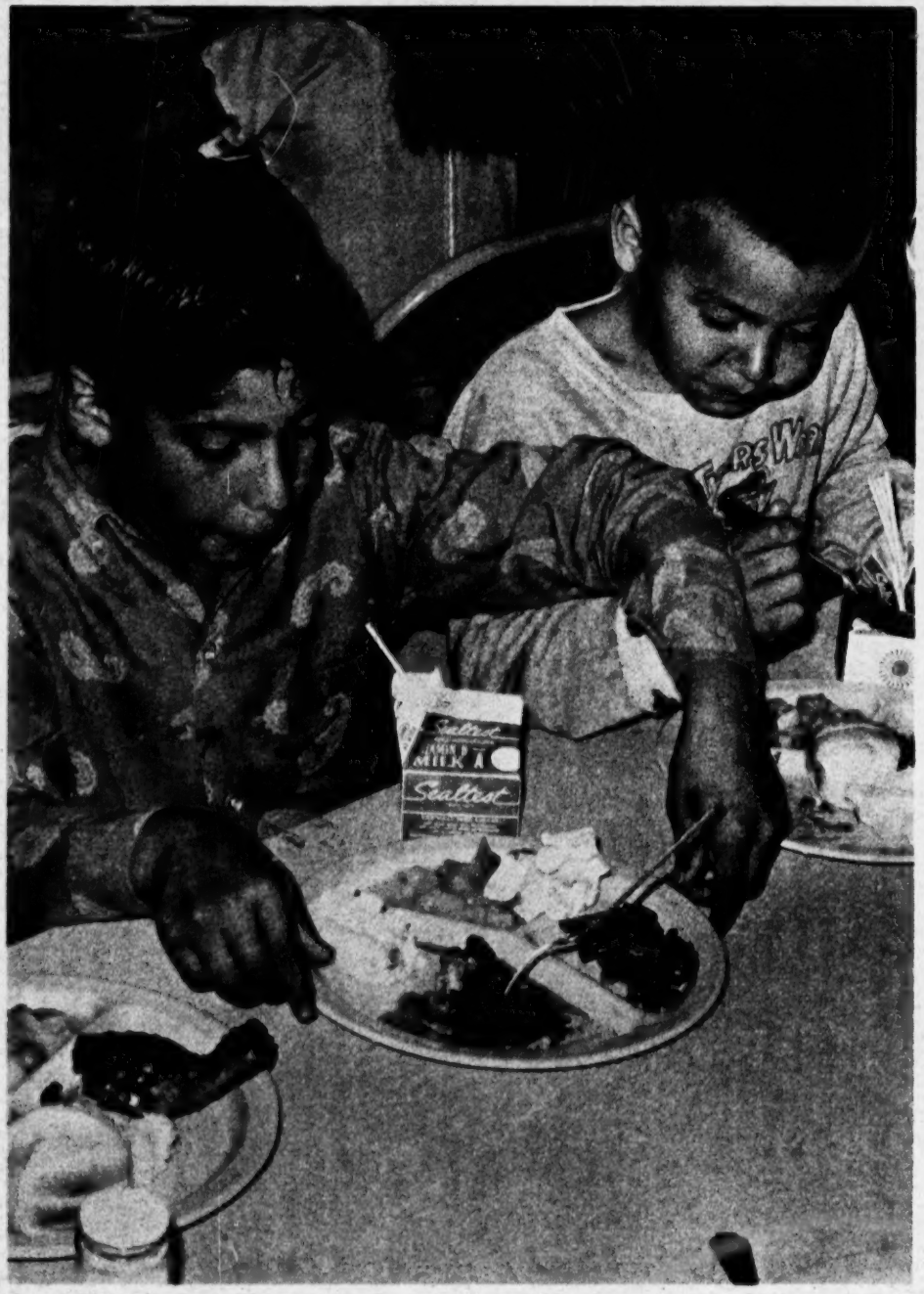
The local school authority that operates the special school in the spring for the south Texas youngsters plans to operate the facility during the academic year with special emphasis on the curricular needs of the migrant children located by the survey.

CONTINUANCE

The survey produced a great deal more than the names and sometime-addresses of seven hundred children whose parents are mobile farm laborers. It imbued those involved with the suspicion that another seven hundred or more are here and haven't been found. It convinced those who worked in it that no single segment of the population is less amenable to a census than are migrant agricultural workers.

Though the formal study ended with August of last year, the State migrant office in conjunction with local school administrators is continuing the search for the migrant child. School attendance records are being studied for significant fluctuations, parish school officers are conferring with principals to find eligible children who were out of State when the count was taken and two additional parishes with numbers of migrant children are anxious to submit projects to serve them.





RECORDS

A further activity of the Louisiana migrant program has been the project of completing for each migrant child the Uniform Migrant Student Transfer form adopted by Migrant Programs Section of the Office of Education.

Just as it is difficult to locate the migrant family, so it is extremely hard in many cases to get accurate vital statistics on the children in the group. The sub-culture constituted by itinerant workers in agriculture puts little stock in record-keeping. Often parents themselves are vague about their childrens' birth dates; sometimes, even the place of birth cannot be pin-pointed. Migrants who speak no English assign a child to answer the interviewer and information on vaccinations, previous illnesses, former place of residence, last school in which enrolled, and the like, is at best tentative.

A special effort is being made in Louisiana to complete the new Migrant Student Transfer Form in personal interviews with parents or guardians, relatives or older children rather than copy data previously recorded on older school or health records.

EPILOGUE

The year's work in seeking out the migrant child and attempting to meet his unique needs has produced an awareness at the State and local levels of the opportunity awaiting administrators of the educational enterprise.

The migrant amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act afford the means for imaginative and energetic educators to move forward, even with seemingly small and tentative steps, toward alleviating the crippling educational and cultural ills suffered by the children whose labor, with that of their parents, sets our tables and stocks our larders.

Louisiana, as an agricultural state, has long been a beneficiary of migratory farm labor. She is pleased and proud to have a part in offering these children a chance to claim a larger share of the good life our nation affords.